Indians Hold Sun Dance at Harvest Time

Indians From All Parts of Reservation Gather For Sacred Sun Dance Near Whiterocks. Rites Continue Until Dancers Give Up With Exhaustion

The Indians of the Uintah Reservation began their sacred Sun Dance Saturday at the grounds between Whiterocks and Hayden. From all parts of the Basin they gather Should one follow them to their place of meeting, he would find abundant evidence of their having gathered there many times before

Singular as is the surrounding country, their rendezvous is even more striking Such a meeting place —nestled obscurely in a forest of scrub pines and cedars—is ideally suited to their purpose in coming together The clearing gives the impression of a colossal cemetery Beginning abruptly where the forest and dense underbrush end it comprises an oblong expanse of perfectly flat, green turf about three miles in circumference Looking away to the north one can see King s peak Mt Emmons and Mt. Gilbert, the highest peaks in Utah, standing shoulder to shoulder Eighty miles east the Blue ridge is visible The Bookcliff mountains to the south and the Wasatch mountains to the west complete the group of giants that isolate the great Uintah basin from the rest of the world

Within the clearing are a number of bare white poles reaching skyward each distinctly a unit having no immediate relation to the others each surrounded by a circle of willows and smaller poles forming an enclosure, each in a different stage of deterioration Within the enclosures formed by the circles of small poles and willows the ground has been trampled bare and hard in the more ancient circles grass has begun to obliterate the scar Except for these strange monotonously similar objects, the clearing is blank, green, devoid of the slightest undulations There are however, certain spots where the grass grows higher and is of a darker, richer color An inspection of such spots would reveal a few remaining bits of decayed wood, the meager remains of other bare white poles that stood erect long ago

The basin is a vast natural amphitheatre including nearly all of eastern Utah. Years ago it was reserved by act of congress for the Ute Indians It had been their hunting ground before the white man came They called it "Uintah" The Utes came into the clearing in the forest each spring to celebrate their one big religious festival, the "Sun Dance" It is their way of paying homage to the Great Spirit

As soon as they are gathered together the young men search for a tall, straight pine which they chop down, strip of limbs and bark, and carry to the clearing Accompanied by weird music, they erect the pole in the center of a new enclosure that has, in the meantime, been built by the squaws and old men of the tribe

When the work is completed, all retire, for on the morrow the dance begins! They enter their tepees in the evening as the stoic, dejected creatures that long and not altogether pleasant contact with the white man has made of them; they reappear in the morning in the feathers and paint of their former glory.

As the sun s first rays caress the newly erected pole, a hideous apparition of feathers, paints and a mask dashes into the enclosure It is the medicine man, mouthpiece of the Great Spirit. Brandishing a tomahawk and emitting animal-like yells, he circls the pole It is the signal for commencement of the dance The flap of each tepee is thrown back and out step the young braves, followed by the squaws and old men. All join in solemn procession to the enclosure

The squaws and old men sit down facing the pole with their backs against the willows. The braves with eyes on the pole, stand in front of them, forming a circle within the enclosure The medicine man alone remains near the pole. Naked except for a light girdle and headress, and covered from head to foot with Indian war paint, the braves stand ready for the next signal Slowly the medicine man raises an arrangement of feathers bound to a stick and softly strokes the pole with it

Those sitting begin to chant in steady, monotonous, neutral-toned rhythm. The braves, blowing eagle s beak whistles at each step, advance toward the pole with that springing stride characteristic of Indian dancing When they have come within a few yards of the pole, they reverse their step and, with bowed heads, dance back to the walls of the enclosure

After this has been repeated for about fifteen minutes the medicine man signals for a halt. The dancers are given a short rest and the dance is resumed.

Hour after hour that steady throbing may be heard between the short intervals of rest. The chanting the whistling and the dancing are in perfect time, and have an almost haunting effect on the spectator At first the combination of the three interests him, then it fascinates him, and lastly it threatens to drive him mad!

Before many hours have passed, the grassy spot is transformed into a dusty area Tired braves advance to the medicine man to receive a sprinkling of the sacred dust from his feather tipped wand. Restored, if only in spirit, they go on with the dance For three days and two nights it continues There is no intermission. There is no necessity for one, all fast until the dance is over.

Most of the dancers fall exhaust-

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ed to the ground before the end but the dance continues in the same steady monotone

On the evening of the third day just as the last rays of the sun fade from the pole, the dancing ceases Beeves are brought into the clearing and barbecued in large freshly dug pits Far into the night there is singing and feasting by the light of a great council fire Before the advent of the white man, this festival culminated in the selection of a new chief from the few braves who had finished the dance, but now that a power beyond their control appoints for them a chief who sits at Washington the Indians have given up this last ritual

Their festival at an end, the Indians return to their homes as suddenly as they came They go fortified in spirit for once again they have responded to an urge that dwells—regardless of race or clime—in every human breast They have paid homage to their Deity—their Great Spirit—whose existence they accept without question

Should one happen upon the clearing some time during the afternoon of the fourth day he would find it deserted the only remaining signs of what had taken place being some freshly turned sod a low uneven mound of ashes and a new enclosure in the center of which a bare white pole—symbol of hope—stands pointing toward the sky

The Dance commenced Saturday and was concluded with the feast on Tuesday

The above excerpt taken from a story written by Miles Burgess